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ABSTRACT

Addressing the problems of recruiting and retaining qualified teachers for small and rural schools, this digest outlines improvements that could be made by teacher education programs, state education agencies, school superintendents, and teachers themselves. Suggested guidelines for teacher education programs stress nontraditional approaches that would allow teachers to obtain the multiple teaching endorsements usually needed in small school districts. Suggested delivery systems include the use of telecommunications, weekend courses, correspondence courses, intensive on-campus courses, and rural centers for preservice and inservice teachers. Change strategies proposed for state agencies focus on certification requirements and funding strategies. At the school district level, suggestions include conducting needs assessments among rural small schools and using shared services to provide staff development activities. Teachers are urged to prepare themselves as generalists rather than subject-matter specialists and to recognize the demands of teaching and living in small communities. A list of 10 references is included. (JHZ)

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SMALL SCHOOLS

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FACILITATING CERTIFICATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR SMALL SCHOOLS

Certification requirements are established by state education agencies to ensure proper teacher preparation and continued professional development. Once teachers are hired, superintendents generally prefer that they remain for a while. Administrators of small and rural schools, however, find recruitment and retention of qualified teachers to be among their most pressing problems. Identifying the contributing factors and suggesting areas for improvement are the first steps toward alleviating the situation.

Who's to Blame?

Teacher education institutions are frequently blamed—

- They do not train the generalists needed in small, rural schools.
- They do not provide opportunities for appropriate professional development.
- They do not attempt either traditional or nontraditional approaches, on-campus or on-site, to meet the special needs of these teachers.

State education agencies are also blamed—

- They adopt certification requirements more appropriate to large districts than to small.
- They do not provide adequate funds to small districts.
- They do not allocate sufficient funding to teacher education institutions to design and deliver appropriate professional development opportunities for small school teachers.

Superintendents are blamed—

- They frequently employ inappropriate recruiting techniques.
- They fail to counsel their teachers regarding appropriate programs of professional development.
- They do not advise teacher education institutions of both preservice and inservice training needs.

Teachers themselves are blamed—

- They often do not recognize that teaching and living in small communities differs from teaching and living in metropolitan areas.
- They tend to select teacher education programs designed to produce subject-matter specialists rather than the generalists needed in small and rural schools.

Because all are responsible for existing inadequacies, all must share in efforts to improve the preparation and professional development of rural and small school teachers.

What Can Teacher Education Institutions Do?

Developing programs for prospective teachers is not an easy task. Teachers must be prepared in subject matter, professional education, and

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teaching methods. Of course, programs must meet state teacher certification requirements and produce the subject-matter specialists desired by larger school districts. The need of smaller districts for generalists with multiple endorsements is frequently neglected. Few institutions of higher education have considered such rural education needs when designing their teacher education programs (Horn, 1981; Meier and Edington, 1982).

General guidelines for designing a program to prepare teachers for small and rural schools should include the following:

- Broad subject areas—i.e., science, not just chemistry.
- Diverse subject areas—i.e., history and mathematics.
- An interdisciplinary curriculum—i.e., one that integrates a variety of subjects.
- Teacher self-sufficiency—to compensate for the lack of curriculum specialists and limited instructional materials and supplies.
- Living in the local community while participating in an early student teaching experience and a teaching internship in a small, rural school.

Such a specifically designed program has its disadvantages. Additional time in training may be needed, particularly if state certification requirements are geared toward specialists rather than generalists. Teachers specifically trained for small and rural schools may require additional training if they desire to move to larger districts. However, if small, rural school staffing problems are to be solved, such disadvantages are simply realities to be accepted.

Multiple teaching endorsements are usually needed in small districts. Therefore, teacher education institutions should include professional development opportunities leading to additional endorsements within a variety of nontraditional delivery systems. The following guidelines should be followed in programs which lead to additional endorsements:

- Avoid duplication of coursework.
- Build on prior coursework and endorsements.
- Provide for diverse as well as related endorsements.
- Include courses that combine subject matter and teaching methodology.

Such programs might be made available to teachers through a variety of nontraditional delivery systems:

- Telecommunications, preferably interactive, with occasional on-site visits by the instructor or campus visits by the students.
- Weekend courses on campus.
- Correspondence courses.
- Short, intensive, 1-week, after-school, on-site courses.
- Off-campus, rural teacher centers for preservice teachers who are interning and living in rural communities and inservice teachers who have day-to-day and professional needs.

In spite of the obvious advantages of nontraditional delivery systems, it must be recognized that some of these delivery systems cost more than traditional systems. Existing funding mechanisms often do not accommodate the additional costs, and administrators may need to seek additional sources.

Finally, teacher education institutions might consider offering graduate degrees in rural education in order to improve their ability to prepare teachers for service in rural and small schools and to deliver appropriate professional development services to these teachers.

What Can State Departments of Education Do?

In most states, the state education agency is required to establish and enforce certification requirements. Among the states, however, there is con-

siderable variation in certification regulations, from general to highly specific. While certification is closely controlled within the agency in some states, in others there is substantial delegation of authority to teacher education institutions. At issue here is the fact that existing certification requirements tend to address the needs of larger school systems, while ignoring those of small and rural schools. Yet a large and growing body of literature details different preservice and inservice teacher education needs for small and rural schools (Gardener and Edington, 1982; Sher, 1977, 1978).

Establishing different certification requirements for teachers in small schools faces opposition from several sources. Teacher organizations oppose different certification requirements as they may obstruct movement between teaching assignments in large and small districts. A teacher desiring to move from a small to a large district (or vice versa) may need additional training and a different certificate. Large districts that operate small schools might face new staffing problems since different certificates might be required of their teachers depending on the size of the schools in which they teach. Small school districts themselves sometimes oppose differentiated certification, apparently from fear that a "rural" certificate may be considered inferior.

Compromise would seem necessary although there appears to be little movement in this direction. Possibly though, states could adopt requirements in broad endorsement areas, thus permitting the prospective or inservice teacher to elect either in-depth specialization or a generalist approach across the endorsement area. It would then be the employing district's prerogative to specify its needs within the endorsement area. For example, two districts might have positions requiring a science endorsement. One district could specify a specialist in biology to teach courses in some depth, while the other could specify a generalist to teach a variety of introductory science courses.

What Can State Funding Agencies Do?

Inadequate funding often casts small districts in the role of training ground for larger districts. In fact, the "experience curve" in small districts is often U-shaped: some teachers with little experience, some teachers with many years' experience, and few—if any—in between. Those who stay often do so for reasons other than the pay or the intrinsic benefits of teaching in small schools. For some teachers in rural schools, longevity is more dependent upon spouse's occupation or a desire for a rural lifestyle than on the school system itself.

There are, however, recruiting and retention incentives that could be implemented to enhance the professional preparation and development of teachers in small rural schools: salary increments for multiple endorsements and/or teaching assignments; professional leave and tuition reimbursement for professional development activities leading to additional endorsements; and reimbursement of professional dues (Swift, 1984). These incentives are of little value, however, unless they are in addition to pay and benefits comparable to those provided in larger districts.

State funding agencies can assist in the professional preparation and development of teachers in small and rural schools through adequate funding of the districts to provide these additional incentives. Twenty-eight states provide additional funding to small districts and to districts with small or isolated schools or with sparse populations (Wright, 1981). The additional funds range from substantial to insufficient. Other states provide no additional assistance. If adequate funds are not available, small and rural school districts may have to be content with second-best teachers and high attrition. Thus, teachers not accepted in larger districts will gravitate toward the smaller districts and will leave at the earliest opportunity.

State funding agencies can also assist by increasing funds available to teacher education institutions which develop and deliver alternative and nontraditional professional development opportunities to teachers in small and rural schools.

What Can School Districts Do?

Superintendents of small and rural districts should advise teacher education institutions of their needs in terms of both preservice preparation and inservice professional development. They may form a coalition to convince the institutions of the extent of the needs. They can solicit the aid of institutions in conducting surveys of teachers and administrators throughout rural and small school districts. Using this database, computer systems can generate information as to specific needs in selected geographical areas and then identify activities and institutions best suited to meet the needs.

Superintendents in small and rural districts should actively assist teachers in devising professional development plans that meet the needs of both teachers and school districts. While traditional preparation programs stress advanced training and degrees in the same or related subject areas, the need in many small districts is for additional, often diverse, teaching endorsements.

Shared services (Hanuske, 1983) can be used in a variety of ways to enhance professional development:

- To coordinate professional development activities.
- To assist teachers, school districts, and teacher education institutions in staff development needs assessment.
- To assist teachers in developing individual professional development plans.
- To provide a professional resource center and delivery site for professional development activities.

What Can Teachers Do?

Massey and Crosby (1983) point out that "nearly two-thirds of all teachers...serve predominantly rural constituencies. And the rural population continues to grow dramatically." Thus, for a student in preservice education, opportunities for employment in a small or rural district are very good. Prospective teachers and their institutional advisers should consider this fact when devising programs of study. With the diversity and ever-changing needs within both large and small school districts, "keep your options open" seems to be very good advice for the prospective teacher. Open options might include in-depth preparation in one subject area while obtaining one or more additional endorsements in different teaching areas (Herbster, 1982).

Not only is continued professional development a state requirement, it also provides a means of attaining flexibility, enhancing career opportunities, and maintaining job security. The teacher who pursues a professional development plan that meets personal needs and career goals—while simultaneously meeting district needs—maximizes benefits to the teacher, to the district, and to the students who are the ultimate beneficiaries.

How Can We Begin the Process?

The issues surrounding teacher preparation and professional development for small and rural schools are complex and interrelated. Their resolution must recognize the interdependence of teacher education institutions, state agencies, school districts, and teachers. Coalitions can be helpful, but equally important are appropriate forums for meeting, discussing, and agreeing—then implementing changes.

Although action is needed on a number of fronts, regional service centers and a state rural education center appear to offer many opportunities, resources, and the forums necessary for improved preparation and professional development of teachers. Joint staffing and funding of the centers by the state department of education, teacher education institutions, and local school districts can serve to emphasize the essential cooperative effort and recognize the interdependence of the institutions and agencies involved.

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